

ARIZONA VETERANS' SERVICE ADVISORY COMMISSION
4141 N. Third Street –Phoenix, AZ 85012
Thursday – December 15, 2005

M I N U T E S

Call to Order - The meeting was called to order at 10:00 a.m. by Chairman Ellis.

Members Present

Advisory Commission Members

Webb Ellis, Chairperson
Mary Ellen Piotrowski, Vice Chairperson
Tom Dingwall
Linda Fulkerson
Phillip Quochytewa
Kenneth Yamanouchi

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services

Fred Ferguson, Deputy Director
Mike Klier, Assistant Deputy Director
Luella Emmons, Assistant Deputy Director
Todd Bogert, Information Technology
Mike Fugate, State Approving Agency (Educ.)
Lee Borgen, Veterans Benefit Counselor II

Members Absent:

Robert Boyd

Mark Laney, Arizona State Veteran Home
Gabe Forsberg, Strategic Planner
Gary Noviello, Chief Financial Officer

Guests – Ray Thomas from the Veterans of Foreign Wars was in attendance. Bo Bohach, Arizona Veteran Hall of Fame Inductee representing NCOA, also attended. Joan Sisco, President/CEO of the Veterans First, Ltd, also attended the meeting and is a sitting member of the Veterans Task Force.

Approval of Minutes - Minutes of the November 10, 2005 meeting were approved as written.

Communications

There were 53 letters sent out November 17, 2005 to all veterans service organizations and to two Navajo Nation contacts (which were specifically requested by the tribe) to request the submission of candidates to fill two Advisory Commission vacancies.

Agency Announcements and Updates

Veterans Task Force

In the absence of the ADVS Director, Chairman Ellis, who attends the meetings of the Veterans Task Force and the Arizona Veterans Council (the group of leadership of several major veterans service organizations), presented the status of the VTF financial recommendations. One member of the VTF, Gary Yaquinto, Director, Office of Strategic Planning and Budgeting, has already discussed these recommendations with the Governor due to the tight budgetary time lines. Key among the proposals that have received the Governor's concurrence is \$10 million for the establishment of a State Veterans Home in Tucson and \$1.25 million in FY 2006 for the hiring of 40 additional Veterans Benefits Counselors. Additionally, the Governor concurred with proposals for monies for state cemetery support and funding for five Veterans One-Stop events to be held throughout rural Arizona where veterans can receive a complete array of services and benefits to which they are entitled. Chairman Ellis wanted the Advisory Commission to be aware of this particular issue so that the Commission outreach meetings can be closely coordinated with these "super-market" events."

During the VTF meeting which the Commission will be attending following its own meeting, a key issue to be resolved is to continue the Veterans Task Force in some capacity in order to address the many recommendations that require further study and simply were not capable of being explored in the short time frame of the VTF. Chairman Ellis asked for any comments from the VTF support staff. Gary Noviello indicated that the issues had been adequately presented to the Commission. Luella Emmons reiterated the importance of VTF being continued and noted that everyone was pleased with the Governor's responses thus far.

Commissioner Dingwall had a question about the monthly reports prepared by the individual Veterans Benefits Counselors (VBCs). He suggested that the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS) carefully track new federal dollars coming into the state as a result of the additional staff. Luella Emmons cautioned that the revenue generated by new VBCs will not be realized immediately. The VA takes some time to process claims under the best circumstances, and the learning curve for new VBCs is between 2 and 4 years. There are, however, several ways that meaningful statistics can be collected (such as counting the number of claims prepared or the number of veterans served).

OEF/OIF (Operation Enduring Freedom / Operation Iraqi Freedom) Steering Committee

Jon Skelly is anxious to finalize the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that was distributed to the Advisory Commissioners. Chairman Ellis belongs to the OEF/OIF group and provided a history of the agreement and requested feedback from the Commissioners regarding the MOU.

The MOU as written refers specifically to the National Guard. Chairman Ellis has been working to get representation from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force Reserves as well. He has been very frustrated at the difficulty getting the names of participants, especially from the Army Reserve. His first inclination was to change every reference in the MOU to National Guard to National Guard/Reserve due to the heavy involvement in OEF/OIF by the Reserve Forces as well as the Guard. However, to avoid impeding progress toward finalizing the MOU, he withdrew his suggestion. Luella Emmons also cited the difficulty the Steering Committee had been having trying to get representation from the Reserve elements. The ADVS Deputy Director, Fred Ferguson, suggested that the MOU include references to "Reserve Components" rather than purely National Guard. The National Guard is included in the terminology, "Reserve Components", and this would allow participation in the MOU by the Services' reserve forces as they see fit at a later date. This suggestion will be forwarded to Jon Skelly, Deputy Director of the VA Regional Office.

Mike Fugate spoke about the difference between the organization of the National Guard and Reserves. Individual Mobilization Augmentees (IMAs) are the individual Reservists who should be included in pre-mobilization and post-mobilization briefings. There is no structure such as a specific unit or other cohesive organization of IMAs, and the Department of Defense has no way to identify who may be deployed from Arizona. The Reserve has a very unique challenge and there does not appear to be an easy way to identify Arizona Reservists.

Jon Skelly emailed a Memo of Agreement between Lt. General Steven Blum, Chief - National Guard Bureau, and Admiral Dan Cooper, VA Under-Secretary for Benefits. It establishes a relationship between the Guard Bureau and the VA to ensure that the returning troops will be given opportunities to learn about VA benefits. The Guard is responsible for communicating where and when the troops will be returning. Gabe Forsberg will email these documents to the Commissioners as soon as possible for their review.

There will be a lot more emphasis on Unified Arizona Veterans (UAV), if the MOU is implemented as written. Commissioner Piotrowski is the Chair for Unified Arizona Veterans and she indicated there may also need to be changes made to its bylaws.

After discussion of specific references within the MOU, it was apparent there was some confusion by the VA regarding the Advisory Commission's role. It might be wise to provide the VA with a clear description of the role to be played by the Advisory Commission. Commissioner Piotrowski may also want to provide a paragraph that describes the work of Unified Arizona Veterans.

Commissioner Dingwall asked if the Arizona Veterans Council might be willing and able to distribute information and assume some of the responsibilities contained in the MOU. Chairman Ellis indicated that this group does not have formal standing and he did not believe it could serve as the carrier group required by the MOU.

Commissioner Yamanouchi pointed out the database mentioned on page 12 of the MOU draft, second to the last paragraph. If the creation of the database is possible and ADVS has the resources to do this, it could be the most powerful component of the program outlined by the MOU. The Information Technology Manager has not yet become involved in the development of the MOU, so it is not clear what resources would be required.

Chairman Ellis was hopeful that all the entities playing a role in this MOU would have an opportunity to comment on the draft before it is finalized. The next meeting will be held 1/5/06 and the Steering Committee hoped to finish the MOU at that time. Chairman Ellis did not want to slow progress in this important agreement, but believed the deadline may not allow participation from key players.

Commissioner Dingwall suggested that the clarifying paragraph to describe the Advisory Commission state that it does not have an action role. The Commission would appreciate being included as information is disseminated, but it cannot assume specific task assignments.

The Advisory Commission has an oversight, advisory, referral and information role in the veteran community. It does not have tasking authority and has limited staff support.

Minor changes that Chairman Ellis will inform Jon Skelly about:

- The correct name is the Arizona Veterans' Service Advisory Commission.
- Fred Ferguson suggested that the term "mobilization" be used rather than activation. The Governor can activate the National Guard. When troops are federalized, the correct term is "mobilized."

Open Discussion / For the Good of the Order

Update of Yuma Stand Down

Commissioner Fulkerson said that her meeting with the Stand Down planning committee on November 19 went very well. It will be held March 3, 4, and 5, 2006. Bill Thornton will be running the Stand Down. A location has been selected, they have arrangements to get haircuts, food and entertainment has been arranged, and they will transport homeless vets to the Stand Down. One obstacle encountered has been with a local judge who said he did not believe that he could render legal opinions from any location other than his courtroom. George Northrup or Ron Buchanon may be helpful to work with the judge. Commissioner Dingwall offered to contact U.S. Vets regarding the Stand Down. The Commission applauded Commissioner Fulkerson's efforts and congratulated her on a job well done.

Update of Safford Meeting

Commissioner Dingwall said that the Military Order of the Purple Heart has been fully informed of the February 11 meeting in Safford. Ray Thomas has done an excellent job advertising the meeting throughout the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Commissioner Piotrowski submitted all American Legion contacts and supplied media contacts in the area. AMVETS contacts were supplied by Commissioner Dingwall as well.

Update of Meeting in February to Discuss American Indian Veteran Issues

Chairman Ellis asked Commissioner Quochoyewa if he had made progress scheduling a "pre-Regional" meeting on Friday, February where the Commission could obtain additional information about American Indian veterans. Because the entire Commission will be in attendance, this meeting will be posted in accordance with open meeting law. Commissioner Quochoyewa will work with Gabe Forsberg to get details of the meeting to her.

Arizona Veterans' Museum

Chairman Ellis indicated that he has been asked by individuals who were interested in donating money to the Arizona Veterans Museum. Send tax-deductible donations to the following:

VFL – Arizona Veterans Museum
8433 N. Black Canyon Hwy, Suite 100
Phoenix, AZ 85021

Bo Bohach asked about the status of the Veterans Museum. So far, there was a federal grant for \$150,000 to launch the project. Councilman Phil Gordon (who has since been elected as the Mayor of the City of Phoenix) pledged additional funds of around \$250,000. The project is estimated at cost around \$2 million.

Ms. Sisco said that the asbestos problem may not be as costly as much as initially anticipated. She was going to call Sara Hall, City of Phoenix, to request an update on the asbestos situation and the project in general. The Phoenix Military Commission has received \$500 from the Gold Star Wives and Joan Sisco said that she would research where these funds have been deposited. Director Chorpenning requested that Chairman Ellis accompany him as he meets with the three individuals with the City of Phoenix. This may be regarding the status of the project.

Ms. Sisco is the vice-chair of the Phoenix Military Commission and she indicated that there has been no action for several months pertaining to funding of the museum. The requests sent out to Arizona gaming tribes have not yet resulted in donation, but there is still hope that the tribes will provide funding. Ms. Sisco will research status and report back to the Advisory Commission.

Director Chorpenning met with Congressman Renzi in D.C. to discuss several issues of importance to Arizona veterans. He had only 45 minutes to meet with Congressman Renzi and there may not have been sufficient time to cover that item. Director Chorpenning has requested that Chairman Ellis accompany him during the week of December 19 to a meeting with city officials regarding the museum.

Navajo Contact

Cassandra Morgan, a board member of the Navajo Veterans' Organization, Inc., read a letter of support at the September meeting in Show Low. Her letter spoke about how her organization wanted to be the primary contact for delivery of service to Navajo veterans. The letter did not contain any telephone contacts and the email address has not been a working address since late

September. Commissioner Piotrowski is very interested in contacting her so that the American Legion can solidify plans to deliver services on the Navajo reservation.

National Guard Personnel Leaving Active Duty without Physical Exams

Commissioner Yamanouchi had done some independent research on this subject. Reservists have 5 days to completely out-process personnel. They may go home earlier than 5 days, so long as they have satisfied all of their requirements for out-processing (which includes a physical exam).

National Guard personnel are different in that they revert to the control of their respective Governor upon return from deployment. They are urged to complete the out-processing prior to returning to their home state but most opt to execute a waiver in order to get home. Commissioner Yamanouchi emphasized the need to educate service personnel before they are deployed as well as upon their return as to the importance of full and complete out-processing. Luella Emmons will provide Commissioner Yamanouchi with a contact at Fort Bliss, TX, where the Arizona National Guardsmen are de-mobilized. Commissioner Yamanouchi is scheduled to visit Fort Bliss in the near future and will further explore this issue as it pertains directly to the Arizona National Guard. This problem is an example of what the OEF/OIF Steering Committee is attempting to address.

Adjournment – Meeting adjourned at 11:50 p.m. by acclamation. Next meeting will be held on January 10, 2005 at the Arizona Veteran Home in Phoenix. Chairman Ellis will not be available from 12/28 until 1/27, so Vice Chairperson Piotrowski will be handling that meeting.